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ABSTRACT

A three-phase "journeyman" approach, inaugurated at The University of California (Los Angeles), to the training of teaching assistants in English is described in this article. The apprentice first works as an assistant to a regular staff member. The second phase involves the teaching of a freshman English section. Finally, with advancement to candidacy under a Ph.D. program, the teaching assistant is given full direction of his course. The main thrust of the article is directed toward developing better teaching at the college level. (RL)

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TEACHING THE TEACHING ASSISTANT

JAY L. HALIO

AT A TIME WHEN THE VEXED PROBLEM of teacher-training is getting much deserved attention, we might well consider the training also of those who will teach in our colleges and universities, our institutions of "higher" learning. Relative neglect of this area of discussion doubtless derives from traditional emphasis upon scholarly rather than pedagogical training for Ph.D. candidates, but a few enlightened souls have lately begun to sound clear and public warnings of the problem that exists. Henry W. Sams, for example, has argued that we must awaken our fledgling colleagues to the fact that their responsibilities go somewhat further than establishing themselves as scholars, critics, and overpowering young polymaths ("The Audiences of English," *CE*, Feb. 1964). Recognizing the problem, however, is only the first step; an analysis of its conditions must follow, from which criticism and suggestions for change may proceed.

If, as I suspect, it is mainly through readerships and assistantships that future professors get their early training and experience, then it is here that detailed analysis of the problem must begin. Moreover, since a rising percentage of basic courses in English is being taught by people now holding assistantships or comparable positions, what we can do to help them will directly and immediately improve actual teaching in the field. Properly understood, the teaching assistantship is an apprenticeship to teaching in the same way that seminar work serves as apprentice training to mature scholarly achievement. Professor Sams is surely right when he says that the problem of learning to teach well is one that cannot "be reduced to formulated statement," that everyone who works it out successfully does so "in his own way, with individual differences that it might be wrong for another man to imitate." This being the case, how is the apprenticeship to be served, and how is it to be administered?

There is, of course, an analogous situation in certain fields of art and music where the student apprentices himself to a recognized master and, if he is good enough, becomes his protégé. Schools may even develop, like the celebrated schools of Donatello and Raphael. In our own time we have seen the rise of schools of criticism, like the New Criticism or, to give a better example, the Neo-Aristotelians. Schools of teaching are not unknown historically, as witness the Sophists and the Peripatetics. In this sense, Socrates was the first master and Plato the first important apprentice in the school of teaching that has come down to us using the dialogue as its basic instrument. Now I am not suggesting that teaching assistants apprentice themselves to master teachers in order that new schools of teaching may develop. I am suggesting that as a first step the teaching assistant may be allowed to choose supervision under a master teacher whose aims and methods appeal to him most. Perhaps this sort of thing happens anyway; it should be encouraged. In a large department, teaching assistants should be able to discover the professors whose "style" they would most like to follow. It then becomes the professor's responsibility to see to it that such discipleship does not degenerate into slavish imitation, that the would-be teacher develops his own abilities according to those methods of instruction that may be peculiarly suited to himself. The master teacher's role, in brief, is to get the man started, and then prepare him to cut loose. How can he best do these things?

Hugh Dick once outlined to me a plan being inaugurated at U.C.L.A. As a teaching assistant, the first-year graduate student works not simply as a reader but as a true assistant to some regular member of the staff, whose clear duty it is to aid the TA in developing awareness and skill in teaching. Toward the end of the first semester, the assistant is given some actual classroom

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experience by teaching a section while the instructor in charge reads most of the papers assigned. All during the term, the teaching assistant has been preparing for this stage not only by reading themes and attending classes, but also by working closely with the teacher in designing reading and writing assignments, assessing the progress of individual students or the class as a whole, and so forth. The TA's work especially involves rather frequent conferences with students—all of them, not just the poorer ones. (I would myself recommend that the third weekly meeting of the class be made into a group tutorial, at least for the last half of the term, run by the assistant himself, not as a section meeting but as a detailed examination and comparison of the writing the students are doing in the course.) At the end of each semester, the TA's performance is evaluated by the master teacher, who is required to give a detailed *written* statement indicating (1) the steps he has taken to develop the TA as a prospective teacher, and (2) the kind of progress the TA has made. If his preparation is adequate, the TA is then allowed to move into the next phase of his apprenticeship.

This next phase involves the actual teaching of a freshman section under the close supervision of a regular faculty member who is teaching a parallel section and using many—but not necessarily all—of the same texts that the TA is using. Weekly or bimonthly conferences are held between the TA and his supervisor in which problems common to both sections of the course are discussed along with individual problems arising in either section. Some classroom visitation occurs and is, I suppose, unavoidable under any system of apprentice teaching. Its drawbacks, however, should be fully recognized by both the visitor and the assistant. The TA should be informed that he is expected to be nervous, that no matter how inconspicuous the visitor may try to make himself, his presence will be felt, at least at first, and that this necessarily will make the visit an atypical situation in his teaching. On the other hand, the constructive purpose of the visit should also be stressed. It should be viewed not so much as a check upon the neophyte as a means of discovering concrete ways to assist his development as a teacher. Perhaps such visits should be made by different members of the staff at different times, but certainly not before the TA has learned to know his class well. How much value the classroom visit will have will of course vary from situation to situation, and in some instances it may have no positive value whatsoever. I think that we should recognize this, too.

The third phase of the teaching assistant's training usually coincides with his advancement to candidacy under a Ph.D. program. Having been properly screened by his supervisors and instructors, he may be allowed full direction of his own section or sections of freshman courses. He may even be asked to take on a more advanced course. An occasional classroom visit by a senior faculty member may be required. If the freshman staff holds regular weekly or monthly meetings, he may participate in them as someone with equal voice and vote in the proceedings. In this way he may be fully prepared to assume his role as a journeyman teacher at about the same time that he assumes a comparable position as a scholar.

These are merely the conditions of the apprenticeship situation, as I understand them, and not a solution to the general problem, for I have so far said nothing about how a good teacher is made. Perhaps some will object that good teachers cannot be made. But even born teachers must be developed, and much may go wrong along the way. I can think of no sure-fire means of avoiding disaster—unless it is the master teacher's own professional discipline and his commitment to his subject. And along with commitment, I should add, a little quiet enthusiasm. But we are speaking of Freshman English now, and in many quarters that makes a difference. The difference usually results from an undue preoccupation with one's special field of competence and a consequent impatience with general education. If Freshman English is the most onerous burden that we shoulder, it might be well to examine the reasons why we feel this way—and in the process to re-examine our own commitments as teachers. For as teachers we are hired, or at any rate as teachers we must serve. We are furthermore obligated to develop the teachers who will

succeed us. In either case, we are very likely to become involved with freshman courses, which when properly taught often have the virtue of surprising us with experiences of the most exciting kind. For there we are out of the realm of vested interests and well-fenced preserves, and are thus most apt to expose ourselves as we truly are.

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